



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

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Strengthening Families and Fathers

What is your favorite memory of your father? Was it teaching you how to ride a bike, or playing board games at the dinner table? Was it a long walk that encouraged a lifelong pursuit, or watching with pride as he defended you or a family member from a bully? Was it singing songs on long road trips, or talks before bedtime?

For the 24 million children in our country who live without their father, the opportunity to create these types of memories is disappearing. Over the past fifty years, social and cultural influences have led to drastic changes in the structure of the American family. People are waiting longer to get married, more people are cohabitating, and marriage is no longer a prerequisite for parenthood - just to name a few. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 41% of U.S. children are born to single mothers, while 1 out of every 3 children are raised in families without their biological fathers. In Virginia, the number of children living in single-parent families has increased from 12% in 1960 to approximately 36% today.

Individuals, children, and families thrive and succeed in a number of different family structures; however, research indicates that children who grow up in intact, two-parent families do better on a wide range of outcomes. In general, children who are raised by single parents are at greater risk of adverse outcomes such as dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, and living in poverty. While growing up in a single-parent home is not the only indicator of these outcomes, family structure has a direct impact on the overall well-being of children.

Understanding the changing demographic characteristics of the American family and the people we serve is critical for shaping social programs and policies. As Commissioner for the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), I have seen firsthand the issues that father-absent homes and fragmented families present. As we all know, involved fathers can help children lead lives that are happier, healthier, and more successful than children whose fathers are absent or simply uninvolved. While a variety of different family structures have emerged, giving rise to a broad and ever-evolving definition of what constitutes a family, VDSS must think differently about how we deliver programs and services to our clients that supports the involvement of both parents and targets the entire family.

This Father's Day and every day - our goal at VDSS is to be the best-in-class social services delivery system in the country while strengthening families at every client contact. In order to

ensure better outcomes for our citizens, our Department is seeking ways to creatively align resources, policies, and processes through a system-wide approach known as the Strengthening Families Initiative. This initiative focuses on reducing non-marital births, connecting and reconnecting fathers with their children, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of safe, stable, intact, two-parent families. Requiring a fundamental shift in how we do our work, this initiative calls for our state and local offices to work closely with members of the faith community, business community, universities and colleges, private foundations, non-profits and other community organizations to no longer define our clients as individuals, but define them as *families*.

As Father's Day approaches, think about your role within your own family. Let's all work towards ensuring that every child in the Commonwealth is able to experience these precious moments. If you are a father, I hope you have the opportunity to spend time with your children. Read a book. Play catch. Take a walk together. Your presence makes all the difference in the world.

Martin D. Brown
Commissioner, Virginia Department of Social Services